



# Using Grounded Theory Approach in Management Research

Hidenori SATO<sup>a)</sup>

**Abstract:** In the field of management research, the grounded theory approach (GTA) pioneered by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is frequently cited to assert methodological validity in qualitative theory-building studies, in contrast with quantitative research that uses majority hypothesis validation. Glaser and Strauss eventually came to disagree with each other, and GTA branched into three perspectives. Of these, Strauss and Corbin (1990), which defines coding and other analytical processes in detail, is cited most frequently although the studies that cite it do not necessarily reflect its characteristics. It is, therefore, clear that the differences in these three perspectives are not connected with differences in research methodologies.

**Keywords:** qualitative research, grounded theory approach, theory building, management research

---

<sup>a)</sup> Faculty of Business Sciences, University of Tsukuba, 3-29-1 Otsuka, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, Japan, [sato.hidenori.fn@u.tsukuba.ac.jp](mailto:sato.hidenori.fn@u.tsukuba.ac.jp)

A version of this paper was presented at the ABAS Conference 2019 Winter (Sato, 2019).

© 2019 Hidenori Sato. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## Introduction

The grounded theory approach (GTA) is one of the most frequently used methods in the field of management research for qualitative theory building instead of quantitative hypothesis validation.<sup>1</sup> However, as is well known, Glaser and Strauss, who wrote Glaser and Strauss (1967), which was the starting point of GTA, parted ways, and GTA has split into multiple perspectives.

This paper discusses how GTA is used for theory building in the field of management research. We found that the characteristics of these various perspectives of GTA have often been cited to legitimize a methodology even though they have not been sufficiently utilized.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section gives an overview of the main perspectives in GTA. The third section takes up the major studies on each of the perspectives, examines articles in the field of management research that cite these studies, and discusses their differences. Our conclusions are stated in the final section.

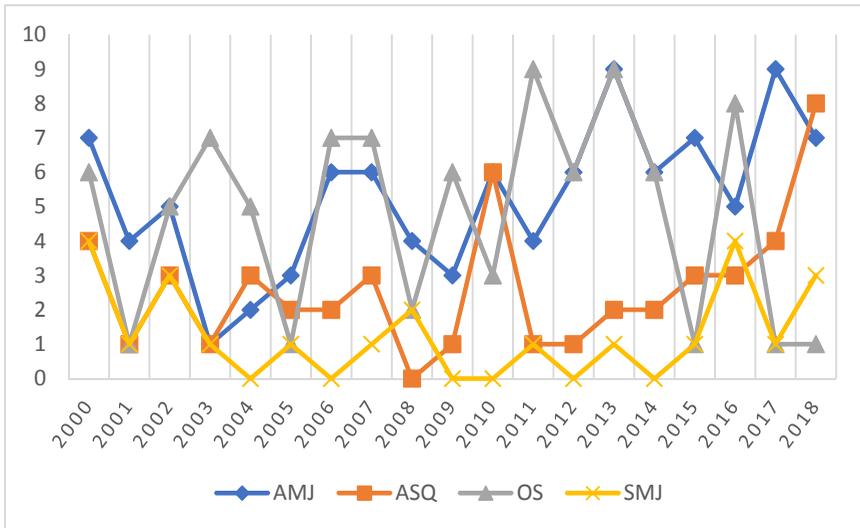
### Three Perspectives on Grounded Theory Approach

GTA is a research method advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Figure 1 shows the number of citations of Glaser and Strauss (1967) in the field of management research.

We can see that Glaser and Strauss (1967) continues to be cited, even in recent years, by the major journals that carry empirical research, such as the *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ), *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ), *Organization Science* (OS), and *Strategic Management Journal* (SMJ), even though the number of

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, it has been used in the field of international business management by the likes of Yasumoto and Shiu (2007) and Hamamatsu (2017).



**Figure 1.** Number of articles that cite Glaser and Strauss (1967)

citations is not large.

However, various perspectives on GTA exist, even outside of the original Glaser and Strauss (1967). First, the conflict between Glaser and Strauss led to varying approaches (Cooney, 2010). Later, Charmaz advocated GTA from a constructivist perspective (Charmaz, 2006).

Thus, GTA has split into three major perspectives (Gligor, Esmark, & Gölgeci, 2016).

The first is Glaser's perspective, which is the closest to the original. It has flexibility in data analysis and focuses in particular on the development of new theories (Fendt & Sachs, 2008).

In contrast, the second perspective, that of Strauss and Corbin, focuses on the verification of theories. Therefore, it more closely prescribes coding and other analytical processes. These points have been criticized in Glaser (1992). From Glaser's perspective, it is

important to create a theory by induction, whereas Strauss and Corbin's perspective focuses on not only induction but also deduction and verification (Cooney, 2010).

The third perspective is that of Charmaz, which is characterized by rebuilding GTA from a constructivist perspective. It takes issue with GTA's positivistic aspects and believes that meaning is formed not through the collection of data by objective researchers but through mutual interpretation by researchers and participants (Gligor, Esmark, & Gölgeci, 2016).

### **Examples of Applications of Grounded Theory Approach in Management Research**

As we saw in the previous section, GTA is classified into three major perspectives. In this section, we examine articles in the field of management research that cite Glaser (1992), Strauss and Corbin (1990),<sup>2</sup> and Charmaz (2006) as major references. The number of citations for these references in major management research journals is shown in Table 1.

The first among the three papers, Glaser (1992), is the least cited in major management research journals. Among empirical studies, it is only cited in Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal, and Hunt (1998) and Huxham and Vangen (2000). However, these papers also cite Strauss and Corbin (1990) and do not reflect the characteristics of Glaser's perspective.

Instead of adopting the approach taken in Glaser (1992), which emphasizes the creation of highly original theories, In Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal, and Hunt (1998) the approach in Strauss and

---

<sup>2</sup> Strauss and Corbin published a second version (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and as Corbin and Strauss, they published a third version (Corbin & Strauss, 2008); however, these editions differ in content, and Huxham and Vangen (2000) and other papers cite multiple versions. We are, therefore, treating these versions as separate literature.

**Table 1.** Citation in major management journals (1990–2018)

	AMJ	ASQ	OS	SMJ
Glaser (1992)	2	1	0	0
Strauss and Corbin (1990)	46	25	39	13
Charmaz (2006)	9	5	8	0
Glaser (1992) + Strauss and Corbin (1990)	1	1	0	0
Glaser (1992) + Charmaz (2006)	0	0	0	0
Strauss and Corbin (1990) + Charmaz (2006)	1	1	1	0
All	0	0	0	0

Corbin (1990) is adopted, which allows the use of existing theories. In Huxham and Vangen (2000), Glaser (1992) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) are cited in the same sentence, and it is not only Glaser (1992) that is relied upon.

The second among the three papers, Strauss and Corbin (1990), when compared with the other two papers, is the most frequently cited.

As mentioned above, Strauss and Corbin’s method prescribes coding and other analytical processes in more detail than do the other GTA perspectives. However, that does not mean that it is adequately reflected in empirical research.

Coding methods may be tied to Strauss and Corbin (1990) and described in quite extensive detail, as in Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann (2006); however, Strauss and Corbin (1990) is not always cited in descriptions of coding as is the case with Gibson and Gibbs (2006). Furthermore, some papers, such as Bingham, Heimeriks, Schijven, and Gates (2015), do not describe coding at all.

In addition, papers such as Champion, Cheraskin, and Stevens (1994) only use pilot studies, and validations of hypotheses do not focus on quantitative or similar methodologies.

The last of the three papers, Charmaz (2006), is cited in some articles, such as Rogers, Corley, and Ashforth (2017), but with Strauss and Corbin (1990) in the same sentence and without referring to their differences, and in others, such as Reid (2015), where Charmaz (2006) is only cited, without any indication of its constructivist perspective.

In addition, many articles cite Strauss and Corbin (1998) but not Glaser (1992) or Strauss and Corbin (1990), and few reflect the characteristics of Charmaz's perspective, cases in point being Whiteman and Cooper (2011) and Huising (2015).

The following three points were made clear in this examination.

- 1) With the exception of their original article, the perspective of Strauss and Corbin is the most often used in the field of management research, with Glaser's perspective being used the least often.
- 2) Few cases cite the representative articles of multiple perspectives, and few clearly explain the reason for adopting a specific perspective within GTA.<sup>3</sup>
- 3) A more detailed look at the content of papers that use GTA shows that the characteristics of each of these perspectives are not reflected in them.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the use of GTA in management research.

---

<sup>3</sup> Although this article gives only one example of a paper representing each of these perspectives, it is possible that each of these could be cited along with other literature. Therefore, we cannot necessarily claim that these perspectives are independent.

As the importance of qualitative research is again being recognized (Gehman, Glaser, Eisenhardt, Gioia, Langley, & Corley, 2017), GTA is growing in importance as a major methodology.

In Walsh, Holton, Bailyn, Fernandez, Levina, and Glaser (2015), it is asserted that the data used in GTA need not always be qualitative but may also include quantitative data.

Actually, when compared with other qualitative research methodologies,<sup>4</sup> GTA has a clear analytical procedure. It is, thus, often used as a source of methodological legitimacy in qualitative theory-building studies in the field of management research, where quantitative research to validate hypotheses is common.<sup>5</sup>

However, in noting “what grounded theory is not,” Suddaby (2006) includes as one common misconception of grounded theory the idea that “grounded theory is not simply routine application of formulaic technique to data,” with a note that new theories are not generated simply by running data through an automatic procedure.

Furthermore, it is also noted in Suddaby (2006) that “grounded theory is not an excuse for the absence of a methodology.” GTA’s characteristics need to be adequately leveraged and should not be used for purposes of obtaining methodological legitimacy.

## **Acknowledgments**

This work was supported by JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Publication of Scientific Research Results, Grant Number JP16HP2004.

---

<sup>4</sup> Besides GTA, other approaches include Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2009). Studies that use their methods include Kim (2015) and Oki (2015). See Sato (2016) for the characteristics of the Eisenhardt (1989) approach.

<sup>5</sup> However, qualitative research is commonly used in some areas (Sato, 2014).

## References

- Bingham, C. B., Heimeriks, K. H., Schijven, M., & Gates, S. (2015). Concurrent learning: How firms develop multiple dynamic capabilities in parallel. *Strategic Management Journal*, 36(12), 1802–1825.
- Campion, M. A., Cheraskin, L., & Stevens, M. J. (1994). Career-related antecedents and outcomes of job rotation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 37(6), 1518–1542.
- Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London, UK: Sage.
- Cooney, A. (2010). Choosing between Glaser and Strauss: An example. *Nurse Researcher*, 17(4), 18–28.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case-study research, *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532–550.
- Fendt, J., & Sachs, W. (2008). Grounded theory method in management research: Users' perspectives. *Organizational Research Methods*, 11(3), 430–455.
- Fox-Wolfgramm, S. J., Boal, K. B., & Hunt, J. G. (J.). (1998). Organizational adaptation to institutional change: A comparative study of first-order change in prospector and defender banks. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43(1), 87–126.
- Gehman, J., Glaser, V. L., Eisenhardt, K. M., Gioia, D., Langley, A., & Corley, K. G. (2017). Finding theory-method fit: A comparison of three qualitative approaches to theory building. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 27(3), 284–300.
- Gibson, C. B., & Gibbs, J. L. (2006). Unpacking the concept of virtuality: The effects of geographic dispersion, electronic dependence, dynamic structure, and national diversity on team innovation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 51(3), 451–495.
- Glaser, B. G. (1992). *Emergence vs forcing: Basics of grounded theory analysis*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York, NY: Aldine.
- Gligor, D. M., Esmark, C. L., & Gölgeci, I. (2016). Building international business theory: A grounded theory approach. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 47(1), 93–111.
- Hamamatsu, S. (2017). Facade mother factory for correspondence of customer's mother factory system. *Annals of Business Administrative Science*, 16, 301–310. doi: 10.7880/abas.0171015a
- Huising, R. (2015). To hive or to hold? Producing professional authority through scut work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 60(2), 263–299.
- Huxham, C., & Vangen, S. (2000). Leadership in the shaping and implementation of collaboration agendas: How things happen in a (not quite) joined-up world. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(6), 1159–1175.
- Kim, H. (2015). How psychological resistance of headquarter engineers interferes product development task transfer to overseas units. *Annals of Business Administrative Science*, 14, 171–191. doi: 10.7880/abas.14.171
- Oki, K. (2015). Knowledge-intensive mother factory: How can a mother factory support foreign factories without mass production activity? *Annals of Business Administrative Science*, 14, 293–308. doi: 10.7880/abas.14.293
- Pratt, M. G., Rockmann, K. W., & Kaufmann, J. B. (2006). Constructing professional identity: The role of work and identity learning cycles in the customization of identity among medical residents. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(2), 235–262.
- Reid, E. (2015). Embracing, passing, revealing, and the ideal worker image: How people navigate expected and experienced professional identities. *Organization Science*, 26(4), 997–1017.
- Rogers, K. M., Corley, K. G., & Ashforth, B. E. (2017). Seeing more than orange: Organizational respect and positive identity transformation in a prison context. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 62(2), 219–269.
- Sato, H. (2014). How do we understand organizational identity effect? *Annals of Business Administrative Science*, 13, 271–281. doi: 10.7880/abas.13.271

- Sato, H. (2016). Generalization is everything, or is it? Effectiveness of case study research for theory construction. *Annals of Business Administrative Science*, 15, 49–58. doi: 10.7880/abas.0151203a
- Sato, H. (2019, March). *Building management theory using grounded theory approach*. Paper presented at ABAS Conference 2019 Winter, University of Tokyo, Japan.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Suddaby, R. (2006). From the editors: What grounded theory is not. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(4), 633–642.
- Walsh, I., Holton, J. A., Bailyn, L., Fernandez, W., Levina, N., & Glaser, B. (2015). What grounded theory is...A critically reflective conversation among scholars. *Organizational Research Methods*, 18(4), 581–599.
- Whiteman, G., & Cooper, J. B. (2011). Ecological sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal*, 54(5), 889–911.
- Yasumoto, M., & Shiu, J. M. (2007). An investigation into collaborative novel technology adoption in vertical disintegration: Interfirm development processes for system integration in the Japanese, Taiwanese, and Chinese mobile phone handset industries. *Annals of Business Administrative Science*, 6, 35–69. doi: 10.7880/abas.6.35
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.